

Serena Chang

Distinction in Dance

Our Hour: Cancer Research Through Dance Community

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Our Hour, a project funded through the Pelotonia Undergraduate Fellowship Program, explores embodied research through choreographic process in collaboration with nine dancers and three people diagnosed with cancer. This project stems from my four years of genetic cancer research in Dr. Gustavo Leone's lab and my degree in dance. The work of Bill T. Jones' dance piece, *Still/Here*, attempted to integrate the arts and the sciences for embodied research, but there remains a deficit in this field of study. My goal is to provide a gateway for increased intersection between the two fields. This project focuses on the rehearsal process and shared experiences through community rather than the final product of a dance piece. This practice supports the idea that dance has the ability to affect profoundly both the dancers and the viewers of movement. Dance ultimately creates a community in which people can come together and help one another.

Before I entered the rehearsal process with my dancers, I studied the research of Bill T. Jones' piece, *Still/Here*, which incorporates stories of people facing life-threatening illnesses. The piece had mixed reviews due to the sensitive subject matter. I learned of this criticism from both Arlene Croce, a dance critic for *The New Yorker*, as well as from David Covey, whose partner had participated in Jones' "survival workshops." In Croce's article, "Discussing the Undiscussable," she claimed his work as "victim art."¹ Joyce Carol defines this as, "An art that manipulates audiences' feelings of sympathy, pity, intimidation and terror."² Jones utilizes video and audiotapes of these victims on stage, while also incorporating terminally ill participants, which was Ms. Croce's main objective in refusing to see or critique the work. She would not discuss or analyze a piece that appropriated terminally ill participants. When I spoke to David Covey, who attended the survival workshops with his partner, I had the impression he

had a very negative experience. In the workshops, Jones would have the participants sit in a circle and share their personal experiences with their terminal illness. Covey shared that Jones would not take the time to really understand or discuss their sufferings and actually cut participants off due to time constraints. Covey saw that there was a lack of support and community. He felt that these participants were used for their stories which were then appropriated for the final work.

Having learned from the experiences and opinions of both Croce and Covey as well as seeing the PBS documentary of Jones' process, I wanted to ensure that we treated this process with care and sensitivity while staying true to my artistic vision. After many conversations with Covey, I decided to make a dance piece encompassing the cancer community. My vision was not to create a dance piece about someone's journey with cancer. The dancers and I felt that this would be appropriation since none of us have had the disease. Instead, I wanted to focus on what we could relate to- being a part of the cancer community. It is rare to find anyone who has not been affected by cancer in some way or form. My nine dancers, myself, and three participants diagnosed with cancer shared our experiences with the disease and discussed how we supported one another through these difficult times. Through rehearsals and our time together, we created the piece, *Our Hour*.

My objective for this project was to create a non-narrative, abstract, contemporary dance piece encompassing the cancer community, which allows audience members to bring their own experiences with cancer to the piece. I accomplished this objective through building a community in collaboration between a choreographer, nine dancers, and three people

diagnosed with cancer: Doug Ulman, Jessica Wilt, and Susan Zanner. I wanted dance to provide an outlet for catharsis, for not only those directly involved in the process, but for the viewers of movement as well. I believe that the arts have an ability to heal a community. It is this belief that inspired me to provide a way for dance to help the cancer community.

Rehearsals became a time in which we all built community. The dancers and I would meet for two-hour rehearsals, twice a week, for eight months. In this time dancers learned the basic science of cancer including tumorigenesis, unregulated cell growth, metastasization, and gene mutation. As the participants entered the rehearsal process, we learned about their personal journeys with cancer, which helped inform and build our community. And the participants, most of whom were non-dancers, were able to share in the process of dance-making.

My background in science and research of cancer acted as stimulus for creating movement; my interest lies in how science becomes the impetus for choreography, which can then take on a visceral meaning. I investigated how bodies transform a space to represent tumor models and how these concepts become a pathway in which corporeal sensation produced specific movement quality. The participants' journeys also acted as a lens to address the human condition through movement. How did their experiences with cancer change our outlook on life? What really is of importance to us? How do we as a community come together to overcome hardships? Another important research point was body language, more specifically, body posture and attention to touch when delivering bad news. This prompted the questions: How does touch and focus change to become more intimate? What body language

predisposes the receiver of the news? The complexity of the human condition and each individual's journey and struggles played a large role in generating movement.

The process and journey of this project were based on collaboration and feedback. The cancer participants were able to offer creative input as outside eyes and dramaturges.

Watching and analyzing the movement gave the dancers and me insight into their personal journeys with cancers. Most of the participants, being non-dancers, gave us another way into the movement that we did not expect. The participants interpreted the movement differently than our trained eyes. I found that this allowed for deepening of the movement intention.

Sharing their input also offered catharsis as they healed. The dancers discussed and physically explored their personal experiences and meaning behind movement material, for when we researched our body posture and tone when delivering bad news. We discovered there is not one way in which someone reacts or tells someone they care about bad news. We worked in partners to discover how our attention to touch changes. Outside of the immediate rehearsal process, the piece also engaged in informal showings with feedback from dance faculty, graduate and undergraduate dancers. Many communities came together in this collaboration.

Three participants diagnosed with cancer, Jessica Wilt, Susan Zanner, and Doug Ulman, largely impacted and shaped *Our Hour*. Jessica was the first participant to enter into the process and served as our way into the cancer community. Jessica was a life-long dancer and graduated with an MFA from The Ohio State University Dance Department. She later moved to New York and continued her career in dance for seven years before being diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer, in 2014. In New York, she served as an arts

educator/administrator and also founded ArtsEdTechNYC. She was most well-known for her love of tap dancing. Jessica was diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma in Columbus, Ohio at The James Comprehensive Cancer Center, where she received her treatment. On November, 12 2015, at age 38, Jessica lost her battle to cancer. Her death came as a surprise to our entire community and profoundly affected us. This was a part of the disease that none of us were prepared to face. Jessica, being a dancer, allowed us to connect with her immediately and on an intimate level. She had the spirit, passion, and drive of a dancer even while fighting through cancer. While in rehearsals, she informed us about her personal experiences and how she saw them through our movement. A particular example of this was in a duet performed by Erin Yen and Tadas Varaneckas ,which will be discussed later. A brave and loving example to all, Jessica truly impacted this piece and continues to live through *Our Hour*.

Susan Zanner was the next participant to enter into the process. Susan was a high school educator, a member of the Bexley Board of Education, and the founding director of School Choice Ohio. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006 and re-diagnosed with cancer in 2012. Susan, age 59, is currently continuing her fight with cancer and is receiving treatment at the Stefanie Spielman Comprehensive Breast Center in Columbus, Ohio. Susan, out of the three participants, played the most active part in rehearsals. She always brought a positive and bright energy into the room. Susan, although not a dancer, was a lover of the arts. She always informed our movement in the most unexpected and interesting ways. Her insight and experiences taught us a great deal about the cancer community and also became inspiration for one of the sections titled, *Quartet*. Susan's influence in this section will be

discussed later. She had a major role in defining and shaping our community within rehearsals. She was a bridge between the science and arts fields.

Doug Ulman was the last of the participants to join in on our rehearsals. He was the former CEO of Livestrong and current CEO of Pelotonia. He was diagnosed with Chondrosarcoma in 1996 and diagnosed twice with Malignant Melanoma in 1997. Doug, age 38, is a three time cancer survivor. Coming into the process during the spring semester, he really allowed the dancers and me to reconnect with the cancer community. Doug was diagnosed with cancer at the age of nineteen just as he was headed off to college. He explained how difficult this was because this was a time in his life in which he was supposed to gain freedom. Instead, he had to depend completely on his family, friends, and strangers to battle his cancer. His experience affected us personally because he was diagnosed around our age. Having to imagine stopping our lives at this point in time was difficult. He gave us a look into what he and his friends had to experience. While watching rehearsals, Doug saw the dense amount of partnering as a symbol of his personal journey. He saw the dependency and trust the dancers had with one another, which was crucial to the trust he had to have in his family and doctors.

The final piece is a dance in three sections. *Our Hour* begins with a quartet accompanied by the remaining five cast members. This section, titled *Quartet*, was based upon a lesson Susan Zanner taught us in rehearsal. She said, "It's more than just cancer, it's disease, family troubles, money... no one fights alone." What she meant by this was that even though her battle with cancer was difficult it was no more important than her sister's problem with money or her

friend's relationship troubles. Everyone is fighting their own battle and we as a community survive by helping one another. From this, I created a quartet in which none of the dancers are doing the same movement. This represented our individual pathways in life. *Quartet* is heavily based on partnering, which requires cooperation and connection. This coming together showed the intertwining of a community in order for life to progress. The section was built on reliance, support, and community. If one of the dancers was not present, the dance could not be completed. Just as Susan explained, the way we survive life is together.

The second section of the piece was given the name, *Quick/Molecular*. The impetus for choreography was based mostly on my scientific knowledge in the field. I was able to use molecular models to design the space with the dancers. The section begins with the building of a DNA strand that progresses to individuals breaking off to represent gene mutation, which is the cause of cancer. Other models include how it takes one 'bad cell' to begin the cycle of tumorigenesis, which is represented by Tim Bondernagel's solo. This then leads to members of the cast joining in on an improvisational score. I used the metastasis process to create a large traveling partnered section involving the entire cast. The nine dancers became one organism that sweep through the stage, with each dancer having an integral part in the functioning system. This organism then breaks into two traveling masses, representing the spreading of the tumor. The process continues until they are left as individuals in space. Although many of the literal aspects of science played a role in designing movement and space, the abstraction created through the dancers and I allowed for human experiences to read through. When Doug Ulman watched this section for the first time, he saw the immense reliance and cooperation among the dancers, reminding him of his own support and treatment. From another

perspective, Jessica Wilt saw the sharp and concise movement aesthetic as an out of body experience similar to those she had after her chemotherapy treatments.

The last section of this piece was titled, *Duet/Jessica*. This section was one of the first the group worked on when beginning the project. Prior to rehearsal, I was informed by my mother of my grandmother's passing. During this phone call, I already knew what she was going to say prior to her delivering the news. There was a shift in her tone as well as the pause and timing between words. This made me think about how we deliver bad news to the ones we love and what predisposes them to receive the news. I also thought about how relevant this was to those with cancer and their own personal experiences of telling their diagnoses to their community. In rehearsals, we began in partnerships in which we researched how our body language changed, along with our sense of touch and focus. We played with how we individually receive and perceive this news. When Jessica Wilt first joined rehearsals, she had a deep personal connection with Erin Yen and Tadas Varaneckas' duet. Their partnership began with an embrace that we created prior to Jessica's arrival. This embrace happened to be the same hold that her ex-husband, Charles Landerfield, held her in when they were reunited. After their divorce, Jessica was not in contact with Charles for seven years. She explained that this divorce was harder than her cancer. When they finally came together in this embrace she told us that she had gotten her best friend back and that the past was in the past. This reaction from Jessica was the first time we as a group saw how dance could impact the cancer community.

Our Hour was performed at the American College Dance Association (ACDA) where it was selected to perform in the Gala on March 7-8, 2016, at The Ohio State University Spring Dance Concert on April 7-9, 2016, and at Moving Together: The Art & Science of One Goal on April 14, 2016. The overwhelming feedback from the piece included its sense of community, humanness, and non-narrative abstraction of a journey. This was especially strong when we performed a five-dancer version at ACDA. At this conference, three adjudicators judged the piece knowing only the title and song selections. Without the knowledge or history of the creation of the piece, they still saw the essence of our process. An audience member who later approached me after the performance was moved to tears, having no background into the cancer community's involvement in this piece. From this, I learned that our shared experiences in rehearsals really did read on stage, even to complete strangers. The piece was selected as an alternative for ACDA's 2016 National Conference at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

The piece, *Our Hour*, was the creation of not only an abstract contemporary dance work, but also a community built on collaboration. The rehearsal process, a time when community is built in the artistic field, was the focus – not the final performance. The fourteen-minute piece addresses the cancer community from multiple lenses and disciplines, which allows for the integration of the art and science fields. The community that we built within rehearsals extended past the dance studio. Through the rehearsal process and feedback from the dancers, cancer participants, and audience members, I saw arts' ability to heal both the movers and viewers of movement. Susan Zanner would often write to me after rehearsals about how participating in the process allowed her to get her mind off her immediate obstacles and let her

breathe. She said coming to rehearsals was more beneficial than staying at home and resting. Jessica Wilt also shared that this project was very special to her because it allowed her to keep her dance spirit alive despite not being able to move with us. In a message she wrote me, she stated that this project was her light at the end of the tunnel and something she looked forward to attending each week.

As I reflect back on the process of making as well as the final product of the piece, there are aspects that I critically analyze. Although this project was based on building community within rehearsals, a product was still expected. Towards the end I felt that the sense of community became more directed at completing a task of creating an effective piece. Also, having to create a new five-member version of the piece for ACDA took away from rehearsal time as a whole group. Since the cast was so large, dancers would have varying interactions with the participants as well as physically dancing on stage. I still struggle with how I could improve this and I think this project would have been more successful with a smaller cast. I felt that we needed more time to complete the process thoroughly.

I believe the final product of *Our Hour* was effective and a touching piece, but I question the length, cast size, section order, participation, and location in where it was presented. The overwhelming feedback as well as my own opinion was that the piece was too short. *Our Hour* was presented as a fourteen-minute piece, but I see this as a forty-five or hour long piece. Ideas or concepts were touched upon in the piece without really being explored. This was also due to the time constraint in rehearsals as well as for presentation at the concert. In the future I would like to look into interweaving concepts throughout the piece such as the

duet or DNA strand reappearing throughout the piece. The monster/metastasis idea could have been expanded into a larger section. Dancer Tim Bendernagel just begins to traverse the stage before Erin Yen breaks off with her own group.

Having a nine-member cast was challenging but allowed for innovative spatial designs and movement. I think having such a large cast was visually compelling because the dancers allowed me to physically change the space with their bodies and create architecture. This was most successful in the building of the DNA strand as well as the monster/metastasis concept. However, having a quartet and duet accompanying the large group led to some difficulties. Trying to emphasize community through different groupings was challenging because I wanted to use my full cast at all times. Also, given that the Barnett Theater had no wings made it difficult to have dancers leave the stage. In fact, I decided to keep all members on stage to maintain the concept of community. This led to questioning the roles of each dancer and their necessity. There was a greatly varying degree of dancing among the cast. In the five-member version brought to ACDA, every dancer had an immediate role in the piece that, I believe, made that version more effective in some regards. In another performance space with wings, I think having dancers go off for certain sections would create more clarity.

The order of the sections was something I struggled with as well. Having brought one version to ACDA successfully, I was very attached to this particular order: *Duet, Quick/Molecular, Quartet*. However, a five verses nine-dancer version made for a different dance. For the spring concert, the order was: *Quartet, Quick/Molecular, Duet*. This led to a less narrative based version. For ACDA, opening with the duet introduced the audience members to

a relationship between a man and a woman that they continued to see throughout the remainder of the sections. The female did not partake in *Quartet*, which ended the dance. This led to emphasizing her role in the duet and community. Overall, I think opening with the duet would be a choice I would make in a longer version of the piece. Especially with the idea of having the duet show up multiple times within the larger work.

Although this piece encompasses a community, dancers had unequal roles in regards to physically moving. While creating this piece, I had no intention of having a few dancers be the center of the piece. Due to what material was kept and what was cut, three of my dancers became the focus: Tim Bendernagel, Tadas Varaneckas, and Erin Yen. These three people, as well as Natalie Newman, begin the piece in the *Quartet*. Bendernagel and Yen are featured yet again in the *Quick/Molecular* section. Varaneckas and Yen then close the piece with the *Duet*. In order to stay true to my project, which focused on the process, I felt it was important that those who made the material should also perform it. I question if I should have featured different dancers in each section or made specific dancers the focus. For example, having Varaneckas and Yen dressed differently than the other dancers would help define or make sense of the varying degrees of participation in the performance.

As I watched the piece being performed for the last time, I was overwhelmed with emotion because of all that we had accomplished. I was so proud of the journey we took together, the trust we had actively given, and the piece that was created from this community. Yet, I also felt a sense of dissatisfaction. Not in the sense that I was not pleased, but that the piece was not done; the journey is not over. In the future, I plan to extend this piece into an

evening length work. I feel that I just began to touch upon ideas that should last much longer.

There is more thickening to be done. This dissatisfaction is not a disappointment, but rather an impetus or direction for the future.

Throughout this project, I learned that the healing process is not just limited to medicine, but spans vastly into the communities we build and the people with whom we surround ourselves. As I continue toward the professional dance world, I plan to also pursue my interest of medicine and research in the realms of dance, focusing on the integration of the arts and sciences through embodied research. My aim is for this project to provide a gateway for more intersection and overlap between the two fields. The nine dancers as well as Jessica Wilt, Susan Zanner and Doug Ulman shared in the human experience through the integration of arts and sciences: art, as the participants acted as creative advisors to the dancers in the studio; and science, their personal journeys with cancer as well as my own knowledge in the subject.

Bibliography

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